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DISCUSSION

SCHOOL ESSAYS AND YELLOWBACKS

Germany is a magnificent machine. A German is peculiarly adapted, both in his virtues and by what an American would consider his weaknesses, to become a cog in the mechanism, a private in the great army of which only certain divisions are uniformed. It has been the writer's privilege to study at first hand one phase of German society—the school—and he has found that her docile, polite, somewhat mechanically industrious youths, bowing their backs beneath an iron discipline and a uniform and sternly a priori method of instruction, offer a somewhat different problem from young Americans. There is no question that Prussian schoolmasters teach their pupils a great deal more positive fact than American children learn. The weakness of the Prussian system is its lack of mobility. Approved new discoveries in method are not easily accommodated, individual peculiarities in children receive little attention. Ever and again a voice is raised in protest and appeal for more flexibility, more care for natural development. A very loud and insistent cry for reform in the treatment of their native language is coming just now from two Hamburg teachers, whose book deserves attention across the water, for the same problems meet teachers of English in America.¹

Germany has arisen in the last few months in a mighty effort to check the inroads of the "yellow" literature that is ruining her youth. A case of robbing Peter to pay Paul, say our paradoxical agitators from Hamburg; for nothing can be "yellower" than the essays your schoolmasters are teaching your children to write. There is no difference at bottom between *The Horned Siegfried* and *Texas Jack*; the characteristic fault of the dime-novelist is to attack subjects of which he knows nothing—exactly as the boy who has barely emerged from the nursery is ordered to sit in judgment on the best form of government for a state; and the writer of penny dreadfuls, like the child in the schoolroom, is making the terrible blunder of trying to pay his debts with sonorous words. If we overlook the somewhat indelicate thrust at Siegfried, which the authors make no effort to follow up, we must allow that there is more than a grain of truth in their main assertion. It would be easy to duplicate from American sources a model "reproduction" of Goethe's "Erlkönig" which they furnish us from a standard German textbook, and which shows as much spontaneity and simplicity as the well-known Boston version of "Little drops of water." Why blur and maim these universal masterpieces by trying to reproduce them, in any case? Can the discipline, if this sort of discipline be necessary, not be secured from some other source? The writer confesses

¹ *Unser Schulaufsatz ein verkappter Schundliterat.* Von ADOLF JENSEN und WILHELM LAMSZUS. Hamburg: Alfred Janssen, 1910.

that he has lost all love for certain gems of English literature which, like a delicate watch, he got apart and has never been able to put together just right since.

Our reformers have no place at all for such work in the scheme which they furnish for the full twelve-year school course. The child suffers more than he profits, they contend, from this sort of imitation. If he must have models set before him, let him try to write first and then correct his efforts with their help; do not cramp and chill his creative instinct by allowing him only to dilute what someone else has said.

As for themes in general, let him write from his own experience or his own fancy. It is neither necessary nor possible to think another's thoughts after him. What another has said may suggest thoughts to us; but if our writing has profit for us or others it is because we are creators—the little child at the school desk just as truly as those of us who are older. It is not true that we must acquire a certain mastery of language before we become literary creators. There is no man under fifty who is not learning more of his native language every day; and there are ten-year-old children in every school who now and then evolve a masterpiece.

It is only too true, alas! that the contributions of the smaller children are likely to show more merit than the painful grindings of their reluctant elders in the upper classes. There is one reason for this state of affairs which it would be the easiest matter in the world to remove. The little children are given subjects which interest them and which they are competent to handle: but although Browning wrote about the piper and the rats, and Goethe sang of the prickly rose, the older children must chop up Browning's poems, and rummage among the fragments of his theology, or explain in what sense *Iphigenie* may be said to be a genuinely German drama. Adults do not, or should not, leave the realities. Forcing the children away from what they like and understand is no preparation for life.

To return to the Hamburg reformers and their argument. After showing the similarity between the essays which the present school program demands and the cheap fiction which the children are not allowed to read, they establish by comparison that many school children write enormously better than their textbooks—though they generally lose the faculty before they leave school; and lastly, from a study of the children's efforts themselves, they arrive at a plan for the future. This last process may seem like reasoning in a circle, but nothing was ever less so. Education can be only a ripening, a development of what is within. A process that makes the child what he was not is inevitably an injurious process.

A detailed discussion of their examination is impossible here. Their plan is an adequate reflex of their investigation, and may be given rapidly as:

First year.—The child narrates his own experiences, orally of course.

Second year.—The same. Drawing used to illustrate the narrative. Attempts at original stories.

Third year.—The same. Written essays on similar themes. Classic children's stories used as models.

Fourth year.—The same. Attempts at characterization. Observation of animals. (Avoid generalization. Discuss particular animals and particular happenings.)

Fifth year.—The same. Accounts of the sayings and doings of smaller children. Original stories. Animal fables, encouraged by classical models. Invention of new Münchhausen experiences. Animals and plants tell their lives and thoughts. The child makes his own continuations of popular children's stories. Natural history. Accounts of physical experiments which the child has taken part in. History stories retold. Geography treated in the same manner, with descriptions of the country which the pupil is familiar with. Chronology, the simplest form of logic, observed in writing narratives.

Sixth year.—Transition to the observation essay. Imaginative essays in the form of dialogue. Stories. Personifications of natural objects. Stories of child life, with attempts at psychological development. Original stories on the model of stories given the pupil. Continuations, as before. Scientific subjects, as before. Logic, spatial as well as temporal.

Seventh and eighth years.—Experience and observation essays as before, growing, of course, more intensive. Imaginative essays as before, with original dramas involving three characters. Stories continued from one class period to another. Scientific essays. Logical essays which have their origin in the pupil's experience. Suggested subjects: an argument between two boys (or girls); thoughts at a funeral; thoughts in a cemetery; "Thoughts When I See the Stars"; "What I Think When I See an Old Woman."

Ninth to twelfth years.—Experience and observation essays which are exact transcriptions of reality; other essays founded on fact but departing from it, leading to a perception of the difference between real and poetical truth. Personal essay, in the form of a journal. Letters to a friend. Memories of childhood. Imaginative essays as before. Attempts at ballad and lyric poetry, historical novelettes, dramas, with special attention to characterization. Study of classical models. Class correction of essays written by younger pupils and of bits of bad writing from other sources. Accounts of exciting moments in plays which have been seen (never in those which have been only read). Essays on pictures, statues, etc., which must not be simple descriptions. Attempts to note the impressions and emotions which come from hearing music. Beautiful houses. Styles of architecture. Churches. Monuments. Scientific essays based on personal observation. Reports of lectures, journeys, etc. Class meetings. Discussion of the questions which arise in student life. Poetical and musical evenings. Publication of a school paper. Logical essays based on questions from the pupils' daily life. Suggested themes: the psychology of lying, of gossip; debts; broken promises; courage and cowardice; death; dreams.

The striking feature of this program, especially when compared with

Prussian courses of study, is the new relation to the classical models. There is no apparent desire to minimize the attention paid to good books, to lessen the pupil's amount of reading, but his essays are not to be mere copies of what he reads. As the author phrases it: "The work does not start from the classical form and arrangement, but is an attempt to lead up to it."

We are assured in this book that the German children do not write as well as they did a hundred years ago, when they were not tormented with a "method" at all. We are also informed that the writers themselves have suffered in style from their years of "discipline" as public-school pupils, and our sympathy with their effort is increased by the information that the Prussian schools are to blame that we have found their book so hard to read. But its faults are faults of style and arrangement: the fundamental idea is a sound one. Even German children must grow from within; and American teachers of English who imagine that American children can develop an English style by slavish imitation of a model, which can no more be incorporated into their being than your rainbow can be mine, are woefully mistaken.

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DEBATING IN THE HIGH SCHOOL

In his discussion of my article, "Debating in the High School," published in the October *School Review*, Mr. E. C. Hartwell seems to have misunderstood altogether the purpose of the writer. Mr. Hartwell concludes his discussion by saying: "The defects inevitable to any school activity should not blind one to its undeniable merits." The article was written with full appreciation of the "undeniable merits" of high-school debating and with the desire that they might prevail. It proceeds, however, upon the assumption that the defects are not inevitable and suggests certain lines of reform. Similar criticisms by writers from different parts of the country justify the belief that, in certain important respects, there is a widespread need of reform in interscholastic debating.

For instance, in the same issue of the *School Review* containing the article under discussion, Mr. A. Monroe Stowe, of the Kansas State Normal College, makes exactly similar charges against school debates and offers similar suggestions for their improvement. To quote the opening of his article:

While debating is not one of the subjects of the curriculum of many of our secondary schools, few of these schools are without one or more debating societies. Those who have come in contact with this phase of secondary-school work appreciate the value of the training gained through debate, but they also recognize some of the harmful tendencies in our present-day practice. It is the purpose of this paper to indicate a few of these evils and to suggest some changes in our procedure which will counteract these harmful tendencies.

The tendencies just suggested may be traced to a mistaken idea of the function or aim of debate. In life the aim of debate is to lead others to act or think as we feel they